

YOU Foundation gives hope in Hatay

17/04/2025 After devastating earthquakes shook Turkey and Syria in 2023, Porsche financed mobile learning units of the Education Volunteers Foundation of Türkiye through the YOU Foundation. They provide children in the affected regions with stability and hope.

With bright bitter oranges dotting the trees and the sun-warmed December air at 20 degrees Celsius, we set out for Hatay Province in eastern Turkey, the expansive green landscape before us. With its population of 1.5 million, the metropolitan region surrounding Antakya was hit the hardest when the earthquake shook the border region between Turkey and Syria on February 6, 2023.

“That night was like an inferno,” says İpek Uralcan, Business Development Manager at the Education Volunteers Foundation of Türkiye (TEGV). The earthquake struck at 4:17 in the morning, accompanied by ice-cold rain. More than 39,000 buildings collapsed, and around 50,000 people lost their lives in Turkey alone. Antakya's old town was almost completely destroyed. Almost everyone we speak to on this mild December day in 2024 lost family members, neighbors, or friends at that time. To this day, many people still live in temporary housing.

Thousands of people flocked to the region in the days following the earthquake to offer their help – the

support, but also the chaos, was enormous. “The challenges in such crisis situations are immense, as the infrastructure is often not functional,” reports Ute-Henriette Ohoven, UNESCO Special Ambassador and founder of the YOU Foundation. For over 38 years, Ohoven has been committed to humanitarian causes around the world, especially for children, young people, and mothers. “We really wanted to help on both sides of the earthquake,” she explains. “In Turkey, but also in Syria.”

The YOU Foundation supports numerous educational projects worldwide and always works together with partners. In Syria with Action for Humanity, and in Turkey with TEGV, one of the country’s largest nongovernmental organizations. TEGV operates so-called Fireflies in truck trailers throughout Turkey – there are 26 of these mobile learning centers in total. “We already had six Fireflies in the region before the earthquake and were able to help right away,” recalls İpek Uralcan. A lucky coincidence considering that most of the access roads were destroyed. Porsche’s financial support helped make it possible to provide assistance in an efficient manner.

Fireflies became most important location for children

Elementary school teacher Murat Çıtır was one of 400 volunteers who in the months after the earthquake would come to Hatay. “There were children who didn’t speak a word for days,” he reports. “We helped them find their voice again.” The Fireflies also provided parents with some respite, as they still had to see to daily life and stand in line at the distribution points for supplies such as food and water. With the schools in the region closed for several months, the Fireflies became the most important location for children.

“They were already standing in line by 8 o’clock in the morning to spend their day with us,” recalls Egemen Ersoy, who managed one of the mobile learning units. A very short time later, TEGV was able to bring another 11 Fireflies to the region, and today there are 18 of them there. “We usually have space for 32 children a day,” says İpek Uralcan. “But after the earthquake, we opened our doors to all of the children. Our volunteers played with them, did activities with them like painting, music, and sports, and were simply there for them.”

In this way, TEGV was able to offer thousands of children a little normalcy again after the disaster. “Some of the children had been buried for days,” says Egemen Ersoy. “Here they were able to forget their worries for a few hours. They were safe with us and away from the chaos of the emergency shelters.”

The effects of the earthquake reached far beyond the Turkish border. In fact, many people who live in Germany were also affected personally, including some Porsche employees like Semsiddin Iflazoglu, who works in assembly at the company’s headquarters in Stuttgart and whose family lives in the Hatay region.

“I witnessed the earthquake and life after it,” he says. “My family lost everything. The houses were destroyed.” From his point of view, it’s absolutely essential that large companies get involved socially in

situations like these.

Structured daily schedule

Porsche made the decision almost immediately to support local relief efforts. Contact was quickly established with Ute-Henriette Ohoven's renowned YOU Foundation, which was already in talks with TEGV in Turkey. “You need a local partner you can trust,” says Ohoven. “Tragedies like this traumatize children, disrupt their everyday lives, and leave them feeling scared. It is fundamental for us as a foundation to offer them a relatively structured daily schedule again. That's why it's immensely important for the children to be able to go to a school and see their friends again.”

The partnership between the YOU Foundation, Porsche, and TEGV is a success story, which we have the opportunity to experience today in a schoolyard in Hatay province, home to one of the Fireflies sponsored by Porsche. In 2023, the sports car manufacturer donated a total of 307,000 euros to support two Fireflies in Turkey and three mobile learning units in northwest Syria. In Syria, 1,433 girls and boys aged between six and 17 were taught in easily erectable tents. The project in Turkey will run until the end of July 2025; so far, more than 14,000 children have been cared for in the Fireflies supported by Porsche.

Those schools in Hatay that were not destroyed opened their doors again in September 2023. The Fireflies have since been parked in schoolyards and now serve their originally intended purposes again as additional creativity locations with access to modern educational content not offered at the schools. This afternoon, 16 children are taking part in one of the program courses. Three student volunteers look after the group, who by all appearances are having a great time. “I love being here,” says 10-year-old Rüzgar, who's familiar with Porsche, of course. “My favorite car brand,” calls out his best friend, Kerem. The girls and boys we have the pleasure of meeting this afternoon are once again looking to the future with hope.

While the dust has since settled in Hatay, construction continues. Even two years after the disaster, there's no such thing as a structured daily routine. Many families are still in the process of building a new life. “But there's hope,” say Mustafa Tunç and Abdurrahman Esen, the managers of the Porsche Firefly. “Our work is successful. We can feel how much better the children are doing these days.”

Info

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